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## Artists use data to make political statements

By Nastaran Tavakoli-Far  
BBC World Service

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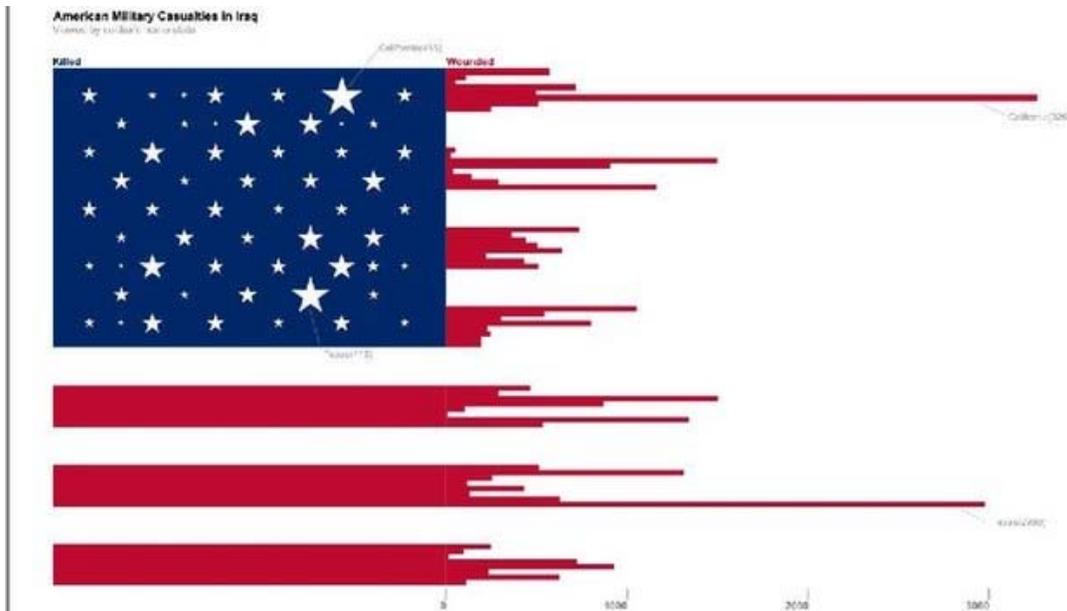
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Doug Kanter's project shows the number of US soldiers injured and killed in Iraq per state

**Big data can feel impersonal, overwhelming and cold. But stark statistics are now being used to make intimate statements through art and public advocacy.**

The past few years have seen the widespread availability of a large amount of data, thanks largely to the internet.

Census reports are easily searchable, campaign polling is expertly parsed and analysed, and online dating behaviour provides a glimpse into human sexuality.

Now more artists are using these impersonal details to make an impassioned statement.

Today Americans often have more information than personal experience about current events, says Professor R Luke DuBois, director of New York University's Polytechnic Institute.

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And as a result they aren't able to comprehend the event's significance.

For instance, DuBois says that for Americans the Iraq war was the first conflict where people had more statistics than first-hand experience of the event itself.

"More of us know the numbers of that war than know anyone who was in that war," he says.

As a result, there is a disconnect between the war and its actual impact on people.

In his musical piece *Hard Data*, DuBois used statistics on fatalities during the Iraq war to help create the score.

Each measure represents a week of the war, and the number of notes played per measure represents the number of casualties that week: 10 casualties in a given week result in a measure with 10 notes played.

The deaths of adult men are signified by sharp spikes in sound, whereas those of children are made of a mournful and eerie drone.

With *Hard Data*, DuBois wants to show the pain behind the numbers.

"These numbers hurt," he says, talking about the statistics of the conflict.

"People don't understand that these numbers have lives behind them."

Doug Kanter is another artist based at New York University who has taken the numbers of the Iraq war and tried to show what they mean for individuals.

In *American Military Casualties in Iraq*, a visual art piece, Kanter has used the image of the American flag to show the human cost of the Iraq war.

The lengths of the stripes show the number of wounded American troops per state, and the size of the stars show deaths of soldiers from each of the 50 states.

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**The numbers are the numbers - you can't argue with them, right?"**

Doug Kanter

New York University

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## Elsewhere on the BBC

The result is a tattered Stars and Stripes.

Having also worked as a photojournalist, Kanter sees the use of data as an extension of his previous work.

"I really do think that you can tell stories with data just as much as you can tell stories with photos," he says.

He also believes that statistics have authority.

"The numbers are the numbers," Kanter says. "You can't argue with them, right?"

It's not just artists who are using the authority of figures to make a point.

Political activists have also taken stock in the idea that numbers in the aggregate can hit hearts just as effectively as a gut-wrenching personal story.

Peter Kauffman oversees communications at the College Board, a non-profit organisation which aims to help promote college opportunities.

Last year the group decided to highlight the problem of high school drop-outs.

They set up 857 student desks on the National Mall in Washington DC for one day on 20 June 2012.



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The desks represented the number of high school drop-outs per hour.

Kauffman believes that seeing the scale of the problem made people realise its importance.

"To walk through what was a sea of desks on the National Mall resonated with people," he says.

"It brought home the enormity of the challenges that we face in terms of education, and really served as a call to action."

Kauffman believes this approach should be used alongside the more conventional one used in politics of elevating a case-study.

Each method has merits, he says, but statistics show how far-reaching an issue can be.

"You're not using one anecdotal story that you've pulled out of the statistics," he says.

While many statistics tell us about ourselves, we often still view them as abstract and unrelated to our lives.

"We tend to think of data as these stranded numbers," says New York Times data artist in residence, Jer Thorpe.

He believes that our somewhat cold relationship with statistics means that we forget that they measure details of our actual lives, rather than just being abstract numbers.

Thorpe tries to get people to look at what the data is measuring.



The College Board set up 857 empty school desks on the National Mall to represent the number of high school drop outs per hour in the USA

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"It is information that is not as dry and separate from our lives as we think it is."

One way to change the way we see statistics could be to incorporate both the individual and the aggregate.



In Ten Thousand Cents viewers can zoom in on each individual's contributions

This is what Aaron Koblin, creative director at the Google Creative Lab, tried to do with the project **Ten Thousand Cents**.

Co-created with Takashi Kawashima, the project is a digital image of a \$100 bill. Ten thousand people, acting in isolation from one another, each use a custom drawing tool to create an individual segment of the final image.

The project allows users to zoom in on each person's contribution, seeing how they create their section, and zoom out again to see the whole group effort, allowing us to see each individual within the bigger picture.

Koblin believes this project shows the potential of using both the anecdote and the aggregate to explore issues.

"It becomes a means of seeing the entire system and making those judgements for yourself," he says.

The individual stories still matter. But they become more powerful when combined with others.

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Racing journalist Derek Thompson recalls how he was summoned from his bed to try to free the wonder horse, Shergar.



#### **Extinction: Beyond dinosaurs and dodos**

Ultimate survival - how species extinction has helped other creatures flourish

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#### **Readers and their poignant teddy bears**

A recent article by David Cannadine about grown-ups with teddy bears prompted readers to write in with their own toy stories.

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#### **Quiz of the week's news**

The Magazine's weekly quiz of the news, 7 days 7 questions.

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